

Portion in red may need to be deleted if not enough room.

The Psychology of the *Yoga Sutras*
An Interview with Michael Stone

Michael Stone understands that we all crave to forget about ourselves and to connect with something larger than the way we represent ourselves, yet, we constantly put obstacles in our own way. That's why we need Yoga, and it's also why we need to approach Yoga from both physical and psychological perspectives. In this interview, we explore the psychological insights of Patanjali and how they can enrich, not only our personal lives, but help to save our planet.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): What does Patanjali mean by *ahamkara* or *Atman* in relation to western psychological terms like ego or self?

Michael Stone (MS): While often translated as ego, the word, "*ahamkara*," literally means the I-maker. That's not really what Freud meant when he used the term ego. The ego is a very important part of the personality. The ego gets a bad rap in the west. We either want a great sense of self or to get rid of it. The ego may not be what Patanjali is talking about, but rather the way we tell stories to ourselves about ourselves. Let me give an example. In the west, so many people suffer from self-judgment. If you can't work with how you judge yourself, your practice will go in circles. From the perspective of Patanjali, judging oneself is actually constructing a self. We create a negative image of ourselves that we then judge—but it's just a story we have. There's no actual thing that we can point to and say, "That is me." The self is just a conglomeration of stories.

One thing that's radical about Patanjali is that he doesn't use the term "*atman*." He uses "*Purusha*," which I understand to be pure awareness that has no form. When we use the English word, "self," instead of *Purusha*, we can make a subtle mistake and think it's referring to "me." *Purusha* is the experience of awareness and forgetting about the stories I have about myself. I think it's more helpful for western students to think about *Purusha* as anything that is not I, me or mine. *Purusha* is not a thing. It's an experience characterized by such a deep forgetting of oneself, that the world breaks through and we suddenly feel intimately connected with everything—and so profoundly that we can even translate the word Yoga as intimacy. Because Yoga is not something we do—we don't try and yoke anything; we come to realize that everything is inherently and infinitely deeply interconnected. This dovetails nicely with our current and important interest in ecology.

IYM: How?

MS: We rarely hear about how our Yoga connects with the world. We buy ecological mats, but that's not really what Yoga has to offer. The true spiritual path of Yoga is a path of intimacy that can offer tremendous solutions to our ecological, social and economic imbalances, which we haven't even begun to imagine. We must give up thinking that Yoga is a practice of self-improvement and begin thinking about Yoga as a practice of cultural awakening. If we really understand the fact that we are all connected, then we can't help but commit to a life of creative, ethical and loving action. Though parts of our practice are about being still, the heart of Yoga has everything to do with activity in the world. The Buddha, Swami Satchidananda and others, did not board themselves up in caves or inner sanctums. When they began to wake up, they started to teach and to serve as expressions of their practice. Their lives are examples of love in action. You don't have to wait until you get the final stage of *samadhi* before you act. Taking action is the heart of Yoga. We have no time to let our spiritual practice become passive, because the rivers are not separate from us. Our bodies are more than 70 percent water. The word *nadi*, that is so central to Yoga physiology, actually means "little river." How we care for the rivers inside the body and the rivers that make up this great planet, determines the kind of world in which we live.

We can put Yoga to work in our families, in our parenting and in our social action so that we stop thinking that spiritual practice is separate from every day life. We are living in such an ecological catastrophe that escaping from the world is unhelpful. If we understand Yoga as intimacy, then we realize that instead of Yoga being about transcendence, it can be instead about imminence. Instead of trying to get out of the round of birth and death, we drop *into* the body, into birth and into the very fact that we are going to die. Then, we truly become so intimate with our lives that we can't even see our lives anymore. We just are. Although many people want to call this enlightenment, which in Indian philosophy is called *moksha*, Patanjali gives up on the word *moksha*. Rather than trying to get out of this life, it puts the practitioner *in* life.

IYM: But isn't *samadhi* the goal of Yoga?

MS: I don't think *samadhi* is necessarily the goal. What's interesting in long-term Yoga practice is not the mystical experience but what we do with it. Do we use states of oneness to bolster and fortify the ego or can those states of deep connection transform our attitudes so thoroughly that we can begin to serve the world? If we think it is the goal of Yoga practice, then we ratchet up a certain state of meditation, as the ultimate. Those meditative experiences that Patanjali describes, I believe to be temporary. As a psychologist, I've encountered meditators and great spiritual teachers who can enter deep stages of *samadhi* and still not deal with other developmental issues in their lives and in their relationships. *Samadhi*, as a meditative state, does not erase neurotic symptoms or old wounds. That's why it's crucial that we never separate the meditation practice of *samadhi* from a commitment to ethical action and self-reflection. In my own meditation practice, I can enter into deep stages of stillness that Patanjali outlines in

detail and, yet, I find that the patterns that my six-year-old son shows me don't necessarily get worked through in meditation practice. They get worked through by bringing attention to my actions and the consequences of my actions, which is the psychology of karma.

Karma is cause and effect – it's not something that happens *to* you. You are karma. In fact, all you are is karma, which is a matrix of endless conditions. Everything I do has a consequence. I can never ever have a clean moral conscience because I can't control the effect of my actions. The only thing I can control, if I am mindful and attentive, is my intention. If I want to be a good friend, a creative member of my community, of which I have a very deep commitment, and also a good parent, then what gets the most attention in my life is karma and how I can best act for the welfare of others. However, to benefit others, I also have to take care of myself. When I take care of myself, through *asana*, *pranayama* and artistic endeavors like writing, I forget about myself. When I forget about myself, Yoga happens spontaneously.

IYM: What is the core of Yoga psychology?

MS: The core is that every action has an effect, but even at the level of perception – the way we perceive ourselves, our moods and those around us, determines what we experience. Patanjali calls this the five *kleshas*. *Avidya*, the first *klesha* is usually translated as ignorance, but the word *vidya* literally means to see. Psychologically, *avidya* means not seeing life as it is or not feeling and being with things as they are. Why? Because of the third and fourth *kleshas*: *raga* and *dvesha* (attachment and aversion). Whenever attachment and aversion are causing high levels of reactivity, we are caught up in stories about others and about ourselves. This is called *asmita*, which is the second *klesha*. The fifth is *abhinivesha*. Most people translate this as “fear of death.” But, it is more subtle than that because it's not so much the fear of death as the fear of the death of the story of me. What we want the most and fear the most is intimacy – because to be truly intimate is to let go of our fixation on our own ideas about how life should be. Though Patanjali never uses the word, I would say that the byproduct of his entire scheme of practice is love – what's left when clinging is relinquished is love, creativity and the freedom to be who we really are.

IYM: How does Yoga as a physical practice, a philosophy and a psychology fit with western psychology?

MS: Over the years, I've become less interested in how they fit and more interested in how they don't – because where they don't fit together is fertile ground for learning. The biggest differences are: a) Yoga offers a profound practice of body awareness via the understanding that, if you want to change your mind, the best place to begin is with the body and the breath, b) If you want to transform your life through Yoga, the first place you start is with ethics and c) In Yoga, the purpose of studying the self and the

patterns of the ego, is to forget about the self and the ego and enter deeply into your life.

The goal of western psychology has never been articulated clearly – but now, things are changing. Psychiatrists and medical doctors have realized that there are layers of mind, body and experience where healing happens that are deeper than language. Now, neuroscience is so open to meditative practices, a new dialogue is beginning that is profound and exciting, though sometimes a little bit naive. The neuroscientists who are studying Buddhist meditation need to stop being so obsessed with deep stages of meditative stillness because they are making those spheres of meditation into an idealized goal. Instead, if neuroscience can focus more on studying the effects of practicing kindness, living ethically and the profound effect on the body and heart of forgiveness and intimacy, then I think we'll be able to take the dialogue between East and West much further.

IYM: Do you think that Western psychotherapy can be a useful part of one's spiritual path?

MS: Sometimes, we can rely on Yoga technique to work through old wounds. Sometimes, we also need psychotherapy. Both practices are valid forms of inquiry. There is nothing about western psychology that is not spiritual, if we understand that the heart of clinical technique is about helping us let go of old habits that are hurting ourselves, others or all parties. There is nothing about the spiritual path of Yoga that is not at bottom, psychological. How can we possibly divide spirituality and psychology? That would be like dividing the mind and the body or snow and water. The entirety of our lives is psychosomatic. We cannot separate the mind, the body and the body politic.

I think there are phases of our practice where we need to process psychological issues in a contemporary psychological way – which means talking, feeling and entering into healing relationships with mentors, therapists or excellent teachers. Since so many Yoga teachers don't understand the sensitive dynamics of projection that happens when dealing with strong emotional material, it's best that, when that material comes up, it's dealt with by someone who knows their scope of practice. Many yogis are disappointed when strong emotions arise and turbulent crises occur in their lives because they each think that their practice is supposed to solve everything. If we can truly practice satya, then we commit to a life of honesty. This means, that if there are psychological issues haunting our relationships – whether in a family or a monastery – we deal with those patterns in our practice, as our practice, and get the kind of help that is necessary so that we can grow and heal.

IYM: How can Western psychology and Yoga enrich each other?

MS: Western psychology is incredibly good at helping us recognize habitual patterns of addiction, conflict and self-constructed stress. But, just because we can understand a pattern, doesn't presuppose that we know how to let it go. Can we let go of the deep-rooted patterns of sadness or anxiety the same way a maple tree can let go of its leaves? This is where Yoga comes in. Yoga teaches us, through meditation on impermanence, through feeling deeply the transient nature of the body and feelings, that anything we hold onto did not really belong to us in the first place. Psychology continually focuses on the content of what arises in the mind and body. Yoga brings attention, not to the content, but to the fact that everything we feel, think, believe and imagine is impermanent. We don't like impermanence when we're happy. We forget about impermanence when we're in pain. Actually, there is nothing that moves through us that is eternal. Everything shifts; just as snow becomes water and eventually all bodies of water come together and then come apart. Even if there are patterns of addiction like eating disorders, self-judgment, anger or a series of bad relationships, none of those things are who and what we are. Nobody is a depressed person or a schizophrenic person all the time. These are patterns and conditions that arise, unfold and pass away and though they need care and attention, they do not define who we are.

Maybe this way of looking at mental illness can help us find more peace in ourselves and in our communities so that we don't keep defining people in pathological ways and keep turning them out of our communities. Maybe in the future, when clinicians have a deeper understanding of the mind and Yoga psychology, we will have a better chance of including everyone in our communities because we may recognize that they are not separate from us. Our culture is so focused on consumption and production that we have no place for people who are suffering and can't work. Perhaps, as we get to know how our minds work, we'll begin to see ourselves even in the faces of people who are suffering much more than us. Then we'll begin to see that nonviolence means including everything and being one not just with pleasure but also with the parts of ourselves and even other nations that we don't fully accept yet.

Michael Stone is a psychotherapist in private practice, teacher, activist and author. He co-leads Centre of Gravity Sangha, a diverse community of Yoga and Buddhist practitioners in Toronto, and travels internationally, teaching in Yoga studios and academic and clinical settings. Michael offers courses and retreats that focus on integrating Yoga postures, breathing practices, meditation and textual study. His research and teaching explore the intersection of committed spiritual practice, art and social action. He teaches Yoga in the tradition of Krishnamacharya and his principal teacher is Richard Freeman. His books include The Inner Tradition of Yoga, Yoga For A World Out of Balance and the forthcoming Freeing the Mind, Freeing the Body, all published by Shambhala Publications. For more information, see www.centreofgravity.org